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ABSTRACT

Theory and research have suggested that counselor self-disclosure can be an effective technique if used for purposes that benefit the client. This study examined variables that might bear on the appropriateness of counselor self-disclosure, such as reported reasons for disclosing and reported content of disclosures. Possible differences in disclosure as a function of gender, ethnic origin, and theoretical orientation of participants were also examined. Participants (N=184) were practicing counselors who were members of the American Psychological Association. No significant differences in self-disclosure were found when comparing therapists of different genders or ethnic backgrounds. Psychoanalytic practitioners reported using significantly less disclosure than humanistic therapists. Counselors seemed to be clear about rejecting some reasons to use self-disclosure (e.g., increasing expertness, attractiveness, trustworthiness, or because the client desires it). Most often they said they disclosed to model appropriate client behaviors, or to increase similarity between the counselor and client. The content of disclosure, as reported by participants, appeared to be appropriate. Participants disclosed most about professional issues and least about sexual issues. The vast majority of respondents did not see themselves as motivated to increase the client's perception of expertness, yet the most commonly reported content of disclosure concerned professional issues such as training and professional degree which would seem to directly effect expertness. (ABL)

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Characteristics of Counselor Self-Disclosure

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Abstract

A survey was sent to 200 male and 200 female practicing counselors to investigate their uses of self-disclosure. Forty six percent returned surveys and the majority of these indicated that they used at least some self-disclosure in their work with clients. Overall, respondents reported disclosing about professional qualifications and experience most often, and that they disclosed mainly to increase similarity between themselves and clients.

Characteristics of Counselor Self-disclosure

Theory and research have suggested that counselor self-disclosure can be an effective technique if used for purposes that benefit the client (Cosby, 1973, Doster & Nesbitt, 1979; Halpern, 1977; Hendrick, 1987; Rogers, 1961; Strickler & Fisher, 1990; Watkins, 1990; Weiner, 1983). Self-disclosure is defined as "verbalized personal revelations made by the counselor to the client" (Watkins, 1990, p. 478). This technique is distinguished from self-involving statements, which are immediate comments made by the counselor regarding the counseling process.

The literature on self-disclosure covers a wide range of factors that may predict how and when counselors use self-disclosure, (Watkins, 1990) but most research has focused on how clients perceive disclosing counselors. Little is known about counselors' actual use of self-disclosure and whether they are following the guidelines for "appropriate" self-disclosure (i.e., disclosure that benefits the client) as outlined by clinical lore and theoretical factors. Our study attempted to fill this research gap. Variables known to influence clients' perceptions of disclosing counselors were included as possible predictors of self-disclosure (e.g., counselor demographic variables). We also surveyed counselors' reasons for disclosing, and the content of typical disclosures. Although our sample was composed of doctoral

level psychologists, the term counselor is used generically because we believe that our results have a significant probability of generalizing across the various professional groups that provide counseling/psychotherapy.

Appropriate counselor self-disclosure is said to consist only of those disclosures that are in the client's (as opposed to the counselor's) best interest (Miller, 1983; Watkins, 1990). Miller (1983) argued that appropriate disclosures were those that promoted client self-disclosure, increased the client's trust in the counselor, and improved the therapeutic relationship. Perhaps a simpler approach to this issue would maintain that disclosures which facilitate therapeutic outcome would be helpful to the client, and thus deemed appropriate.

Whether disclosure is viewed as facilitative varies according to theoretical schools. Yalom (1985) asserts, "More than any other single characteristic, the nature and degree of therapist self-disclosure differentiates the various schools of (group) therapy" (p. 212) and indeed, clear statements can be found about the appropriateness of disclosure from the various theoretical perspectives. For example, humanistic approaches view counselor self-disclosure as a relationship-building tool (Mowrer, 1964; Rogers, 1961). Psychoanalytic writers disagree with this position, maintaining that the danger of the critical transference relationship being distorted outweighs any

benefit gained from self-disclosure (Nillson, Strassberg, & Bannon, 1979). Behavioral therapists argue that the use of self-disclosure provides appropriate modeling for the client (Marlatt, 1970; Spiritas & Holmes, 1971). Finally, the eclectic approach to counseling, endorsed by large numbers of practitioners (Smith, 1982), is so varied in form that it is difficult to determine how this perspective views self-disclosure.

At a process level, interpersonal theory would predict that counselor self-disclosure would facilitate outcome if it increases counselor expertness, attractiveness, or trustworthiness (Strong, 1968). From this perspective, then, the content of disclosure is of interest, because certain disclosures (i.e., of degrees, length of experience as a counselor) would presumably facilitate expertness or trustworthiness. Disclosure of life experiences similar to that of the client would enhance attractiveness.

Studies of counselor social influence have attempted to document the influence of self-disclosure on counselor power and have produced mixed results. Merluzzi, Banikotes, and Missbach (1978) found that low-disclosing practitioners were perceived as more expert than high-disclosing practitioners. Also, low-disclosing counselors were rated as more trustworthy than high-disclosing counselors. In contrast, McCarthy (1982) found that self-disclosing counselors were rated as more expert and trustworthy than non-disclosing

counselors. Peca-Baker and Friedlander (1989) found no differences in clients' perceptions of disclosing and non-disclosing counselors in a quasi-counseling study. Because most other studies of interpersonal influence and disclosure used analog methods, Peca-Baker and Friedlander speculated that their results, obtained using a more naturalistic method, were evidence that variability in disclosure was not as influential in client perceptions as had been previously believed.

Studies of self-disclosure and social influence have focused on client perceptions of disclosing counselors. Counselor motivations for using this technique are largely unexplored. Further, the results of the perceptual studies do not address the question of whether counselors use self-disclosure as a way to bolster their social influence by increasing their expertness, attractiveness and trustworthiness.

Another way to look at counselor self-disclosure is simply to consider whether clients want their counselors to disclose, rather than assessing the effects of such disclosure. Some studies report that clients desire substantial amounts of some types of counselor self-disclosure. For instance, Hendrick (1988) found that clients wanted their counselors to disclose information regarding professional issues, personal feelings, success/failures, interpersonal relations and attitudes.

VandeCreek and Angstadt (1985) suggested that when expectation and actual amount of counselor self-disclosure differ, the client may perceive the counselor negatively. From this perspective, then, meeting the client's expectations regarding self-disclosure may constitute appropriate use of this technique.

Counselors may justify the use of self-disclosure as modeling appropriate behavior for the client. Deforest and Stone (1980) reported that subjects' disclosures increased in a linear fashion reflecting the amount of disclosure made by stimulus counselors in transcripts. Doster and Brooks (1974), using an audiotape analog format, determined that more client self-exploration and self-talk was evident for conditions of positive and negative counselor self-disclosure than for a no disclosure condition.

As noted previously, the content of counselor disclosures may be important in determining the impact of this technique. Content has been previously studied by using broad theoretical categories such as positive vs. negative (Anderson & Anderson, 1985; Doster & Brooks, 1974; Hoffman & Spencer, 1977; Klein & Friedlander, 1987), past vs. present (Dowd & Boroto, 1982; Cherbosque, 1987), high vs. low intimacy (Berg & Wright-Buckley, 1988; Derlega & Chaikin, 1976), and interpersonal vs. intrapersonal disclosures (Nillson et al., 1979). For instance, Dowd and Boroto (1982) found no difference between past or present

counselor self-disclosures as rated by participants viewing videotapes of simulated counseling sessions. Nillson et al. (1979) found that subjects who viewed videotaped counseling sessions evaluated interpersonal and intrapersonal counselor self-disclosure more positively than no disclosure. Berg and Wright-Buckley (1988) found that black clients preferred white counselors who disclosed intimately as compared to white counselors who disclosed superficially.

Hendrick (1988) took a different approach to studying the content of counselor self-disclosure. She devised a Counselor Disclosure Scale which she used to explore the types of disclosure desired by clients. Her categories were more closely tied to actual content than previous research (e.g., personal feelings, interpersonal relationships) and she found a pattern of disclosures desired by clients across these categories (see Table 3). In our study, we used Hendrick's approach to disclosure content, because we believed it would present a more detailed picture of how counselors use this technique. Also, we wanted to compare client preferences to counselors' disclosures of content.

Finally, we are aware of no studies that have investigated the influence of counselor ethnic origin on the amount or type of disclosure used. Berg and Wright-Buckley (1988), as mentioned above, examined the preferences of African American students for counselor self-disclosure in an analog study, and Cherbosque (1987) investigated the

responses of Mexican participants with a similar method. However, neither of these studies varied the ethnicity of the counselor. Watkins (1990) suggested that the ethnic origin of client and counselor might be related to the effects of counselor self-disclosure, so we included counselor ethnic origin as a variable in our study to determine if counselors of varying ethnic origins disclosed differently from each other.

Clients' perceptions of counselors who disclose do not generally seem to vary according to the gender of the counselor (Deforest & Stone, 1980; Hoffman-Graff, 1977; McCarthy, 1979; Merluzzi, et al., 1978; Nillson, et al., 1979; Perrin & Dowd, 1986). An exception is provided by Merluzzi et al. (1978), who found that high-disclosing female counselors were rated less trustworthy than low-disclosing female counselors. This finding is contrary to traditional stereotypical roles that predict positive reactions to women who disclose, since self-disclosure is more consistent with the feminine role (Basaw, 1986; Chelune, 1976; Derlega & Chaikin, 1976). Though these studies seem to show no consistent patterns of gender or ethnic origin differences in clients' perceptions of disclosing counselors, we questioned whether they would inform us regarding counselors' reported rates of self-disclosure.

In summary, numerous studies have examined how clients react to self-disclosing counselors. However, little effort has been devoted to exploring how counselors disclose, or their stated reasons for disclosing. Although we might expect that research on client perceptions might influence the ways in which counselors use self-disclosure, this effect has not been investigated. We distinguished between self-disclosing and self-involving techniques, choosing to study only the former for purposes of clarity and brevity. We were particularly interested in variables that might bear on the "appropriateness" of counselor-self disclosure, such as reported reasons for disclosing, and reported content of disclosures. We also tested for possible differences in disclosure as a function of gender, ethnic origin, and theoretical orientation of participants.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Four hundred psychologists, (200) female and (200) male, were randomly selected from current membership directories of the American Psychological Association (APA). The population surveyed was defined as those psychologists who were currently licensed at the doctoral level and reported practising psychotherapy. Participants were also selected by self-description as having a non-child oriented sub-specialty. Divisional affiliation was not considered as a selection factor. Each subject received the survey

materials and a prepaid addressed envelope in which to return completed forms.

Measures

The questionnaire developed for this study included items assessing gender, ethnic origin and theoretical orientation. Six items stated possible reasons for using disclosure and respondents checked any that applied: a) client desires b) modeling c) to increase perceived similarity d) to increase perceived trustworthiness e) to increase perceived expertness f) to increase perceived attractiveness. The overall frequency of self-disclosure used by practitioners was assessed on a 5 point Likert-type scale (1=always to 5=never).

We adapted Hendrick's (1988, 1990) Counselor Disclosure Scale in an effort to measure the content of self-disclosure reportedly used by practitioners. Items on Hendrick's original survey asked client-respondents to rate their preference for content that they desired from counselors. Items were adapted for this study by changing "the counselor's" disclosure to "my" disclosure (e.g., one item was changed from "The counselor's feelings of fear" to "My feelings of fear"). The 32-item scale is composed of six subscales: Personal Feelings, Interpersonal Relationships, Sexual Issues, Attitudes, Professional Issues, and Success/Failure Issues. Items were rated on a Likert-type scale with endpoints (1=always to 5=never). Hendrick (1990)

reported reasonable independence among the subscales (correlations from .10 for Sexual Issues-Professional Issues to .69 for personal Feelings-Interpersonal Relationships) as well as acceptable internal consistency, with standardized alphas ranging from .71 for Attitudes to .86 for both Interpersonal Relationships and Personal Feelings.

Results

Of 400 surveys sent out, 184 were returned, yielding a 46% return rate. The sample was 49% male and 51% female. Approximately 6% of the participants were Hispanic, 88% were Caucasian, 1% were Black, 4% were Asian, and a remaining 1% answered other (e.g. American Native, German). The 184 respondents reported the following theoretical orientations: a) analytic (23%), b) behavioral (4%), c) humanistic (4%), d) cognitive (14%), e) eclectic (51%), and 4% responded "other" (e.g. feminist, transactional analysis).

For our sample, the overall internal consistency (Chronbach's alpha) of the Counselor Disclosure Scale was .95. Subscale coefficients were as follows: Personal Feelings, alpha = .91, Interpersonal Relationships, alpha = .92, Sexual Issues, alpha = .86, Attitudes, alpha = .78, Professional Issues, alpha = .86, and Success/Failure Issues, alpha = .91.

The mean amount of self-disclosure reported by participants was 3.13 on the 5-point Likert-scale, which corresponds to the scale descriptor "sometimes". Only 6% of

the participants in this study indicated that they never used self-disclosure as a therapeutic tool. An effort was made to validate the single item Likert-type self-disclosure measure by correlating responses to this item with the overall number of content responses endorsed on the Counselor Disclosure Scale. The resulting coefficient of .67 was significant, $p < .05$, and suggested that the two measures were tapping similar constructs. To simplify analyses, the single-item measure was used for subsequent analyses.

An independent groups t-test (two-tailed) showed no significant difference between genders in amount of reported self-disclosure, $t(182) = 1.32$, $p > .05$. A second two-tailed t-test compared reported self-disclosure for participants of Caucasian ethnic origin and those of other ethnic origins (frequencies in separate categories of ethnic origins were too small for meaningful analysis). This observed t comparing cultural groupings was also nonsignificant, $t(182) = 1.31$, $p > .05$.

A one-way ANOVA that compared self-disclosure across theoretical orientations (analytic, behavioral, cognitive, humanistic, eclectic, and other) yielded a significant effect, F (5,178) = 2.23, $p < .05$. The mean disclosure scores for each of the theoretical orientations are shown in Table 1. Post-hoc test of the means (using Duncan's Multiple Range Test) found only one significant difference,

between the means for the psychoanalytic and humanistic theoretical orientations (2.45 vs. 3.28 respectively), indicating that humanistic participants reported using more self-disclosure when compared to psychoanalytic respondents.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 2 shows frequencies and percentages for participants' endorsement of reasons for using self-disclosure. No analyses were attempted because these observations were dependent (i.e., participants could choose more than one reason).

Insert Table 2 about here

The six subscales means for content of self-disclosure were treated as repeated measurements in an ANOVA. The within subjects effect, representing differences in participants' endorsements of the various content subscales, was statistically significant; $F(5, 179) = 187.53$, $p<.001$. Means and standard deviations for the subscales are reported on Table 3, along with Hendrick's (1990) results for client-desired disclosures. As Table 3 notes, lower means correspond to higher amounts of self-disclosure.

Post-hoc Duncan's tests found significant differences between the means for Professional Issues (2.63) and all other means, indicating that respondents disclosed more

about this issue than about the other content categories. The means for Success/Failure and Interpersonal Relations did not differ from one another (3.67 and 3.74 respectively), but were significantly different from all other means. Likewise, the means for Attitudes and Personal Feelings (3.96 and 4.09 respectively) did not differ from one another, but were different from all other means. The mean for disclosure of Sexual Issues was significantly different from all other means. Overall, the means for this analysis indicated that the subscales fell in the following pattern for most to least reported disclosure: Professional Issues, Success/Failure, Interpersonal Relations, Attitudes, Personal Feelings and Sexual Issues.

Insert Table 3 about here

Table 4 shows the breakdown of reasons for self-disclosure according to theoretical orientations. Because the frequencies were dependent, and cell sizes in some cases were very small, no analyses were attempted.

Insert Table 4 about here

Discussion

The results of our study indicated that our sample was using a moderate amount of self-disclosure, and reported disclosing most often about professional issues. When

evaluated from the different standards of appropriateness addressed earlier, our respondents appear to be using self-disclosure in acceptable ways. Further discussion of our results is organized according to the major classes of variables studied.

Gender and Ethnic Origin

No significant differences in self disclosure were found when comparing therapists of different genders. At least two possible explanations could account for these results. First, the gender of the client could influence how counselors disclose, a factor that we did not take into account. Second, in an age of changing gender stereotypes and related behaviors, biological gender may be less influential than sex role orientation, as Watkins (1990) has suggested. Both of these explanations could be easily investigated in further research.

Practitioners of different ethnic backgrounds reported no difference in amounts of self-disclosure in this study. The validity of these results should be considered with respect to the disproportionate number of minority to non-minority respondents (88% non-minority, 12% minority). It is possible that different cultures endorse different attitudes about self-disclosure, and combining individuals from a variety of ethnic groupings into one category would obscure differences among the individual cultures.

Theoretical Orientation

As Yalom (1985) predicted, theoretical orientation was related to the amount of self-disclosure reported by participants in this study. Psychoanalytic practitioners reported using significantly less disclosure than humanistic therapists, as expected. No significant differences were found between the other theoretical orientations, but the behavioral group's mean was close to that of the humanists, which might be expected as this group would approve of self-disclosure in the interest of modeling appropriate behavior. Practitioners endorsing an eclectic theoretical orientation, (the majority of our participants) reported relatively infrequent use of self-disclosure (their mean was close to the analytics'). We did not explore what constituted an eclectic theoretical orientation, so can not safely speculate on why these practitioners were relatively conservative in their self-disclosure.

Reasons for and Content of Self-disclosure

A primary contribution of the current study is the exploration of counselors' reasons for disclosing personal experiences. Counselors seemed to be clear about rejecting some reasons to use self-disclosure (e.g., increasing expertness, attractiveness, trustworthiness, or because the client desires it). Most often, they said they disclosed to model appropriate client behaviors, or to increase similarity between counselor and client.

The content of disclosure, as reported by participants, appeared appropriate. Participants disclosed most about professional issues (e.g., degrees, experience), and least about sexual issues. It is encouraging to note that the most controversial content areas (sexual issues, personal feelings) were those about which participants reported disclosing least.

The vast majority of our respondents (96%) did not see themselves motivated to increase the client's perception of expertness, yet the most commonly reported content of disclosure, according to content survey responses, concerned professional issues such as training and professional degree which would seem to directly effect expertness. The stimulus for these disclosures might be that clients are requesting this information, or perhaps disclosure of professional information is such a standard practice (to establish informed consent) that counselors do not consider the interpersonal impact of these disclosures. These speculations raise an interesting question about when counselors disclose -- are they disclosing, primarily about professional information, in the early counseling sessions? Future research could add a variable to the Counselor Disclosure Scale that would ascertain when in the course of therapy counselors disclose about the various content areas.

A closer examination of our findings reveals another interesting discrepancy between motives for and content of

self-disclosure. As our respondents reported that they used self-disclosure to increase similarity between counselor and client, yet reported disclosing information regarding professional issues more frequently than any other content area, it would seem that the content of their disclosure is at odds with reasons for the use of this technique. Self-disclosing counselors may be decreasing counselor-client similarity by disclosing frequently about professional content; however, they may be simultaneously increasing counselor expertness. Perhaps participants were referring to the second most commonly disclosed content, success/failure experiences, when they referred to increasing client/counselor similarity. How motives for and content of self-disclosure are related remains a question for further exploration.

Related to the findings regarding expertness as a reason for disclosing was the apparent reluctance of participants to endorse the other social influence variables, attractiveness and trustworthiness, as reasons for self-disclosure. Given research relating social influence to therapy outcome, (Heppner & Claiborn, 1989; Grimes & Murdock, 1989) and the analog studies which suggest that social influence variables are effected by counselor self-disclosure (Watkins, 1990), it is interesting that our participants were unwilling to cite these factors as motivating their disclosures. It is possible that

counselors and therapists are uncomfortable acknowledging that they influence their clients through expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness, or they may be unaware of the impact of these variables. Future research might be directed at clarifying this issue.

Respondents also failed to endorse "client's desires" as a reason for using self-disclosure. Yet, participants in our study reported a pattern of content disclosure that approximated the pattern found by Hendrick (1990) when she surveyed potential clients for the kinds of disclosure they wanted from therapists. It is interesting that counselors do not report responding to client preferences and yet report a disclosure pattern similar to the content pattern desired by clients. Considering that some literature suggests clients' expectations and preferences affect the counseling relationship (Frank, 1974), further research is needed to explore whether practitioners are aware of client preferences for self-disclosure and if so, what they think about responding to them.

The two most frequently endorsed reasons for self-disclosing among our respondents were modeling and increasing similarity. Although we might expect the behaviorally oriented counselors to be the most enthusiastic proponents of modeling, an inspection of Table 4 suggested that except for the analytically oriented and the "other" category, over 50 percent of the respondents in each

theoretical orientation endorsed this justification for self-disclosure.

Caution should be taken in interpreting these findings due to the moderate return rate (46%). It is certainly possible that those who did not respond are disclosing in ways different from those found in our sample. Also, the survey was sent to APA members, all of whom were doctoral-level practitioners. Although we think it unlikely, this characteristic of our sample may limit generalizability of our results to a narrow population of practitioners. Finally, respondents were not asked to report demographic variables that may be related to the use of self-disclosure, such as amount of professional experience, typical client problems, and educational background (clinical vs. counseling, scientist and/or practitioner), among others. As many researchers have suggested, counselor self-disclosure is "far from being a simple intervention" (Watkins, 1990, p. 478) and our results are only a small contribution to the research needed to understand the role of this technique in counseling.

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Table 1

Mean Self-disclosure Scores Across Counselor Theoretical Orientation

Theoretical Orientation	M	SD	n
Analytic	2.45^{a}	0.94	42
Eclectic	2.90^{ab}	0.90	95
Cognitive	2.92^{ab}	0.86	25
Other	3.00^{ab}	0.58	7
Behavioral	3.12^{ab}	0.35	8
Humanistic	3.28^{b}	1.38	7

Note. The higher the mean, the greater the amount of self-disclosure used. Means with different letters differ at the .05 level of significance (e.g., mean for Analytic is only different from the mean for Humanistic).

Table 2

Percentage of Respondents Endorsing Various Reasons for Self-disclosure

Reason	n	%
1. To model self-disclosure as a desired behavior for clients	95	52
2. Because the client desires self-disclosure	61	33
3. To increase perceived similarity between counselor and client	101	55
4. To increase client's perception of counselor's trustworthiness	44	24
5. To increase client's perception of counselor expertness	29	16
6. To increase client's perception of counselor attractiveness	7	4

Note. Ns refer to those respondents indicating that they used self-disclosure for the reason presented. Percentages are of the total responses. Because respondents could endorse more than one reason, the frequencies and percentages are dependent, and the percentages total more than 100%.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations for Content of Self-disclosure

	Counselors' Report		Clients' Preference	
Self-disclosure Scale	M	SD	M	S
Professional Issues	2.63[a]	1.03	1.76	.53
Success/Failure	3.67[b]	.84	2.69	.68
Interpersonal Relations	3.74[b]	.85	2.74	1.00
Attitudes	3.96[c]	.72	3.23	.93
Personal Feelings	4.09[c]	.75	2.58	.79
Sexual Issues	4.34[d]	.74	3.58	.85

Note. The lower the mean, the higher disclosure reported by counselors and the more disclosure desired by clients. Client data are from Hendrick (1990). Means with different letters differ at the .05 level of significance (e.g. Professional Issues is significantly different from all other scales and Success/Failure is significantly different from all other scales except Interpersonal Relations).

Table 4

Respondents Endorsing Reasons for Using Self-disclosure by Theoretical Orientations

	Reasons					
	A Client Desires	B Model	C Similar	D Trust	E Expert	F Attractive
Analytic	9	12	17	9	3	0
Behavioral	5	5	7	4	1	0
Humanistic	2	5	5	2	1	0
Cognitive	11	16	11	4	9	0
Eclectic	34	54	56	25	14	7
Other	1	3	5	0	0	1

Note. Respondents were asked to check any reasons which applied; frequencies are numbers of participants who responded affirmatively to the stated reason. Frequencies are dependent; therefore total frequencies could exceed the number of respondents in a give theoretical orientation.

Codes: A = Client desires, B = Modeling, C = To Increase Similarity, D = Trustworthiness, E = Expertness, F = Attractiveness